

## Local Government Training Highlights Role of County Jails on Budgets, Programs

On any given day, 10,000 people are locked up in county jails in Arkansas. But what does that have to do with county government?

A lot more than most people realize. Arkansas counties allocate over 30% of their annual budgets toward public safety, namely the county jail. Sheriff budgets affect property and sales tax rates, and what revenues remain for other important county services.

Wayne Miller, an economist in the Community, Professional and Economic Development Center at the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, teamed up with Kristin Higgins in the Public Policy Center to highlight the role of jails in local government in a recent seminar for county agents.

Agents learned about how growing incarceration rates affected county budgets, as well as how their educational programs involving nutrition, finance, workforce development and horticulture could be adapted for jail-based re-entry efforts.

“In my view, you have a special opportunity to really engage with that sheriff and that county judge, and say, ‘here’s some resources, here are some opportunities, here are some things we can do to be a strong partner,’” Sterling Penix, the director of Arkansas’ Criminal Detention Facilities Review Committee, told agents.

The one-hour seminar was part of a series of online inservice trainings offered between July and December to highlight Extension resources and critical issues facing county governments. As part of the trainings, agents brainstormed social media posts they could use to encourage civic engagement.

Previously, this series was offered in person every other year in a two-day training. Covid concerns prompted the switch to online.

The 2021 Local Government Inservice specifically included one-hour seminars on:

- **Responsibilities of County Governments.** This session reviewed the roles of elected county officials, and the public services the Arkansas constitution delegates to counties.
- **Developing Effective Working Relationships with County Officials.** This session focused on the internal budget planning process county officials follow and how agents can build trust with local leaders year-round.
- **Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic & Other Critical Issues Facing County Governments.** The director of the Association of Arkansas Counties discussed the pandemic’s impact on tax revenue. The session provided updates on federal and state policies related to infrastructure and highlighted demographic shifts in Arkansas.
- **Inside/Out – County Jails as Community Development Partners.** This session was the first CPED inservice to focus on county jails. Agents could see how incarceration rates and county expenses increased rapidly in recent years. They also learned about the health and safety standards county jails must meet, which recently led to dozens of counties seeking sales tax or property tax increases to build or renovate their facilities.
- **Developing Local Ballot Issue Fact Sheets.** With a decline in the number of local newspapers and an increase in misinformation online, Extension-produced voter guides on special elections provide communities with a neutral source of information. This session walked agents through

the process of how to work with local officials on creating easy-to-understand materials for voters. Extension has provided voter guides since 2004.